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Title:
Tang China

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TANG CHINA, text by Edmund Capon
Photography by Werner Forman
(Pan Books Australia, \$39.95).

DON DUNSTAN

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AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES, DESPITE the efforts of a number of dedicated scholars, remain absurdly Euro-centric in their studies and courses, and by that fact, affect school curricula. Although today there is both greater enlightenment and tolerance than in the last century, attitudes to the peoples of the Orient remain prejudiced and ignorance of their history, civilisation and achievements remains abysmal in this country.

We must be grateful, therefore, for a book which gives a succinct account of the Tang Dynasty in China, its administration, its customs, its thoughts, its literature and its art. In the West, we are accustomed to look upon Attic Greece, the Roman Empire, and the civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy as major episodes in history, formative of much of subsequent human activity. When I studied history at Adelaide University in the late 1940s, the textbook was entitled 'World History, the Growth of Western Civilisation'. The only mention of the Tang Dynasty was in a chart in the back cover of one volume. But in the history of the world, the civilization of China under the Tang has influenced more of the world's people than ever did the Western developments I have mentioned.

It was one of the great periods of human achievement. At a time when Angles, Saxons, Jutes and later Danes were decimating previously Roman Britain, the Tang Empire extended from Vietnam to Mongolia and Tibet to the Pacific. Its capital, Ch'ang An, was then the biggest city in the world, and nearly as large as present-day Paris. The census of A.D. 754 records a tax-paying population of close to 53,000,000 people, living in 321 prefectures. Block printing and paper had been invented in China and thousands of copies of the Confucian classics were cheaply available to eager students. There was an extensive civil service selected by an examination system so that China was managed far less by an hereditary nobility than by a meritocracy.

Ch'ang An was a great, planned and cosmopolitan city. One of the things most striking to a Westerner when visiting China is the effective planning of ancient Chinese cities. Unfortunately Ch'ang An, on the site of the modern (and smaller) Xian, was wholly destroyed. This presents a problem for Edmund Capon, because an illustrated account of Tang culture only has two remnants of Tang buildings to depict. However, he was able to draw on the fact that thousands of Japanese scholars, artists and writers came to China in the Tang period and took back with them not only the Chinese civilisation they had found, from Confucian texts to tea ceremonies, Chan (read Zen), Buddhism and geisha girls, but its architecture. So by looking at still standing buildings of the seventh and eighth centuries in Japan, one can gain some idea of what the architecture of Ch'ang An must have been like.

The gold and silver objects, the silks, the paintings, the poems and prose works, the bronzes and above all the ceramics we do have, however, to illustrate what Edmund Capon has called 'that period of noble and gregarious self-confidence that has ever since been viewed as an eternal source of inspiration for a great and continuing civilization'.

Mr. Capon gives a brief history of the Tang emperors, and their administration, the institution of the 'equal field' system of land distribution, and the generally evil influence of eunuchs at the palace; he gives an account of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism and their interaction. He makes clear the degree of contradiction between Confucian thought, 'mainly relating to the conduct of human affairs on earth', and Taoism, 'concentrated on nature and the forces of the universe'. He chronicles the support of the Emperors for the spread of Buddhist teachings and establishments, but in addition, their tolerance of other faiths and creeds. In A.D. 635 the Tang Emperor admonished Muslims intent upon putting a Christian to the sword and said 'The Way has more than one name. There is more than one Sage. Doctrines vary in different lands, but their benefits reach all mankind. A man of great virtue has brought books and images from afar to present them in our capital. After examining his doctrines we find them profound and pacific. This religion does good to all men. Let it be preached freely in the Empire.'

The development of poetry in the Tang period has influenced all Oriental use of poetic form since, and latterly, the rest of the world. At a time when the best that Europe could produce was the Latin verse of Alcuin, Li Bo wrote

"A monk from Shu, clasping a Luq i lute,
Descends the west face of Omei peak.
He sweeps his hand over the strings for me,
And I seem to hear pines sing in a thousand ravines,
And a running stream that washes the ache from my heart.
The faint notes blend with the icy bells.
I had not noticed the dusk on the green mountains.
How many folds are hidden in the autumn clouds?"

And before he died Hamada, the Japanese living national treasure, one of the greatest potters of all time, lamented to me his inability to match some of the Tang glazes.

Edmund Capon, in his lifelong fascination with China and its culture, is an ideal guide to its treasures. He has produced a text eminently readable, beautifully illustrated by the sensitive photography of Werner Forman.

Don Dunstan, politician, author, social historian, founder of the Museum of Chinese-Australian History.

TANG CHINA

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